

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.25.20

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. ¹⁵You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. ¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. ⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴"The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" ? ⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (355)

This sermon preaches itself. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." If you know nothing else from the Bible, know this. If you know nothing else that Jesus said, know this. "Love God. Love your neighbor."

It preaches itself.

It might be interesting also to know this—that Jesus, according to Matthew, said this during the last week of his life, when things were getting tense and heated. He's remembered to have said a lot of pointed things that week. According to Matthew, he told a lot of troubling parables, the steady moving through which these last several weeks have been a slog, if you ask me. So, it might be interesting to consider that he's remembered to have said this amidst a string of encounters that silenced and amazed those who'd come to him to test him. The Sadducees, the Herodians, now (as

often) the Pharisees. It might have us looking here for something that would silence by amazement these who'd come to test him.

It would be tough to find.

What's so unsettling about this crystallization of the faith: love?

Really, this might be the most appealing appeal of the Christian faith, that it can so crystalized: love.

But, the fact that the faith can be crystalized, could be crystalized: this is maybe the thing that would have unsettled the Pharisees. After all, it was their job to interpret the Law so people could live by it—and the more you interpret something, the more complicated it can become. As such, under their watch, the Law became a thicket—those ancient, original 613 commandments become a whole library of teachings and prohibitions and elucidations. It could make for a rich religious life, the study and explication and expounding of such things. But for those who didn't seem to want to live such a life, for those who were shepherds or fisherman or tanners or mothers or midwives or heads of households, it could be overwhelming, if not altogether exclusive.

These people who were supposed to open the way to righteousness for all the people sometimes managed to hold that way closed—these Olympians of religion. Because not everyone wants to be an Olympian. Some people want the equivalent of just playing frisbee with friends.

That said, it isn't just that Jesus seemed comfortable crystalizing this complex faith and practice. It's also that he complicated it in his own way.

The Pharisees (many of them) rested assured that they loved God in a way not only true but also to be imitated. Their adherence to the Holiness Code in particular, as found in Leviticus, was to make them as a model to all. As such, they were perhaps eager to see whether Jesus believed the commandment to love God was the most important.

They, of course, likely did. But judging from how Jesus lived, so blithely as regarded the Law of God, they might well have thought that Jesus didn't. Judging from his habit of befriending tax collectors and eating with sinners, not to mention his storied working on the Sabbath (healing the sick even on the Sabbath, plucking grain for eating later even on the Sabbath), they might have thought Jesus would be casual about devotion to God, just as he seemed casual about his devotion to the Law of God. And these two really couldn't be distinguished from one another. To love God

was to be devoted to the Law of God. To love God was to be obey God's commandments—all of them.

As for Jesus, he simply didn't do that. He simply didn't *seem* religious.

Tobias has a t-shirt with a picture of Jesus on it. Some fashionable brand, this company appropriated a Renaissance depiction of Jesus, fine art set onto a "luxury" t-shirt, whatever that is. Twice now people have approached him about it.

Once, it was a young priest at the Shrine where Tobias works in the gift shop, images of Jesus printed on anything and everything. The priest wanted to know whether Tobias was wearing this ironically.

"No," Tobias tossed off. "Jesus is awesome," a statement itself which left the priest still wondering.

The other time it was a born-again guy from a gym where Toby's rowing team works out. "That t-shirt exploits Jesus," the trainer told him. "Why are you wearing it?"

"Because Jesus is awesome," Tobias said, and then pointed out, "Pictures of Jesus are everywhere. You think they're all exploitative?"

Is it possible the Pharisees thought Jesus was being ironic in his near-constant evocation of his Father? Is it possible the Pharisees just didn't believe him? Because, as I said, he just didn't *seem* religious. What's more, he wasn't evoking the Father in an obviously religious context. I mean, he'd only just made it to the Temple now. For three years he'd been evoking the presence and reality of God, but only just now had he made it to the actual place where that's best to be done.

So, which is it, Jesus? Which is the most important commandment, if there could even thought to be one most important commandment, lifted out of this whole complex of commandments?

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Good choice.

But, never one to leave well enough alone, he then coupled it with this one, which the Pharisees might have been less convinced as to its importance: "Love your neighbor as yourself." After all, it wasn't clear that the Pharisees did right by that commandment—for did they, in all their work, truly love their neighbors as themselves?

And, before you answer that, consider that loving the neighbor was no abstract thing; it wasn't some feeling-state as regards "your neighbor." Though we might assume so, they would have had both a much more immediate experience of "your neighbor" and a much more filled-in understanding of what such love would have looked like. We of two-acre zoning can entertain the notion that such love of neighbor is a nice thing, a fine thing. They, of nomadic survivalism (in the case of the earliest Israelites, those who received the Law), or of imperial occupation (in the case of the Jews living amidst Rome during Jesus' day) would have had a more actualized understanding of what such love looks like, how such love works, and what end such love serves—not pleasing sentiment but sustained and even flourishing life for each and for all.

To love is to perform a set of commitments and behaviors.

To love is to decide to love, to commit to loving.

It's sort of like the conversations we've been having about racism in this country.

Consider, there are those who think anti-Black racism, for example, is an individual feeling or personal attitude as regards Black people; and they defend themselves against any such charge of being racist by defending their personal feelings as being not that.

Meanwhile, there are those who think anti-Black racism is a complex of policies and behaviors, both individual and collective, that adversely affect as a group those perceived as Black; and they defend against any such charge of being racist by examining their behavior and the policies that either favor or disfavor them. They do this understanding that it is these policies that create a reality that feeds the personal attitude of anti-Black prejudice or hard feelings of anti-Black animus.

I've heard Black people say of white people in America, "I don't care what's in your heart. I care who's in your neighborhood, and how and why they came to be there; whom you vote for; with whom you send your kids to school."

Calling on the Law of God, Jesus understood love thusly, and even love of God thusly, as directly related to love of neighbor, which involved not feelings or sentiment, but commitments, behaviors, policies.

You shall not render an unjust judgment.

You shall not patronize the poor or cozy up to the rich, but you shall treat everyone with equal estimation, opportunity, and justice.

You shall not go around talking smack about people, glorying in their humiliations or remembering them at their worst moments, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor, neither exploiting their labor nor gaining power because of their vulnerabilities—making fun of them, mocking them, scoffing at their attempts merely at living.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin, but you shall enjoy what inheres in those in-born relationships—the chance at a deepening of character, and an honoring of history and the future and our slow walk amidst time. These time-worn relationships can be evidence of a fine, resilient spirit and can be opportunity for refining such a resilient spirit.

You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself, for such allowance of someone else to be beyond reproach contributes to their destruction. Consider those who are beyond reproach. Consider those who have no one in their lives who will tell them, “No.” They can be dangerous, downright monstrous, these who operate beyond reproach. At the very least, they are deeply lonely. Don’t let the people whom you hold in mind and heart become beyond the loving hold of sociability, which is to say reproach.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, for there’s no better way to ruin relationship than to hold on to old injuries, secretly keeping count. There’s no worse way to fight than to say, “You know, you always do that.” By the time it comes to such broad statements, the relationship is in peril, which puts in peril the household or even the whole community.

It might be interesting to know all that. It might be interesting to know my interpretation of these readings. You’ve come here for preaching; I’ve come as a preacher. And one of my favorite understandings of what preaching is, is that it’s an opening of the way for Jesus to walk among his people. Very often, what I feel I’m doing as a preacher is clearing space for us all to have God occur among us, and this is sometimes simply about taking time.

That’s what I’ve been doing with this one. Now, though, simply remember this: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Thanks be to God.